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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the reading preferences of American Indian and Anglo children with respect to ethnicity of main character, gender of main character, and setting in children's stories. The 160 subjects consisted of 80 American Indians and 80 Anglos from Grades 2 and 3, divided evenly by gender and grade level. The study yielded significant preference differences for ethnicity of main characters, gender of characters, and type of setting. Both Indian children and Anglo children preferred to read about Indian characters over Anglo characters. A majority of all subjects indicated a preference to read stories with both an American Indian and an Anglo as main characters, rather than stories with two Indians or two Anglos as main characters. Males preferred to read stories with at least one male character over stories with only females; girls preferred to read about two boys instead of a boy and a girl. Both Indian and Anglo subjects preferred stories set in a suburban-type setting over reservation-like settings. Three statistical tables and sample illustrations used in the stories for ethnicity, gender, and story setting are appended. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/KRN)

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Title:

Reading Preferences of American Indian and Anglo Children for Ethnicity, Gender, and Story Setting

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Abstract

This study investigated the reading preferences of American Indian and Anglo children with respect to ethnicity of main character, gender of main character, and setting in children's stories. The 160 subjects consisted of 80 American Indians and 80 Anglos from Grades 2 and 3, divided evenly by gender and grade level. The study yielded significant preference differences for ethnicity of main characters, gender of characters, and type of setting Both Indian children and Anglo children preferred to read about Indian characters over Anglo characters. A majority of all the subjects indicated a preference to read stories with both an American Indian and an Anglo as main characters, rather than stories with two Indians or two Anglos as main characters. Males preferred to read stories with at least one male character over stories with only females; whereas, girls preferred to read about two boys instead of a boy and a girl. Both Indian and Anglo subjects preferred stories set in a suburban-type setting over reservation-like settings.

Introduction

Educational reform is of prime concern and interest to educators as well as the general public. This concern is understandable when 13% of all 17-year-olds, and 40% of all minority youth can be considered functionally illiterate, (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The concern still exists for students who proceed on to attend college. Approximately 25% of the Hispanic and American Indian students attending one of the nation's largest universities report that they did not feel adequately prepared for their coursework, (Morrison Institute, 1990). These problems and others are being addressed by different educational reform measures. One focus of the reform measures is to decrease illiteracy by improving reading achievement in the primary grades.

One way of improving reading achievement is to provide students with interesting material. Cecil's (1984) study revealed that interest in reading material has a positive relationship to comprehension of the content. Research also indicates that intrinsic motivation to read increases when children are exposed to materials that reflect their reading preferences (Busch, 1972). Clearly, authors and publishers should use children's preferences as an important basis when designing stories and other educational materials for children (Harper-Marinick, Sullivan, and Igoe, 1990; Summers and Lukasevich, 1983).

This study investigated children's preferences related to three variables in stories: ethnicity of the main characters, gender of the main characters, and setting of story. These variables are particularly relevant to current concerns about multiculturalism and equity in our society.

Children's preference for ethnicity of the main character is a component of reading material that has been neglected. Studies have shown that primary grade children exhibit a preference for their own ethnicity when making friendship choices (Braha & Rutter, 1980; Davey & Mullin, 1982; Denscombe, 1983). This suggests that children may also prefer to read stories with characters of their own ethnicity. However, the availability of reading material about children of their own ethnicity is limited for many minority children. In a random sample of 203 stories found in 1st, 3rd and 5th grade basal readers, only one story containing an American Indian was found at the first grade level, six at third, and nine at fifth (Reyhner, 1986).

Research on gender of the main character suggests that children in the primary grade children prefer to read stories about characters of their same sex, with boys demonstrating a stronger same-sex preference than girls. Rose, Zimet and Blom (1972) found that first-grade boys preferred stories with male characters and first-grade girls preferred stories with female characters. Research by Harper-Marinick, et al. (1990) revealed that first- and third-grade Anglo, Hispanic, and Black inner-city students strongly preferred both same-sex and combined-sex (a boy and a girl) pair of characters over those of the opposite sex. Beyard-Tyler and Sullivan's (1972) study revealed that among adolescents in grades 7, 9, and 11, boys preferred to read stories with male protagonists and girls preferred to read stories with female protagonists. However, both boys' and girls' preferences for males increased at the highest grade level.

The setting of children's stories has been an area of increased interest in recent years. It is a popular adult belief that inner-city, minority children should be exposed to reading materials that reflect their everyday environment. However, research by Okada and Sullivan (1971) and Harper-Marinick, et al. (1990) indicate that this belief may not be consistent with children's preferences. Findings from their studies indicate that inner-city children prefer stories with a suburban-type setting.

The present research was conducted to study the reading preferences of Anglo and American Indian second and third grade children with respect to ethnicity of main character, gender of main character, and story setting. The study investigated preferences for reading stories with either: 1) Anglo main characters, American Indian

main characters or both, 2) male main characters, female main characters, or both, and 3) settings similar to or different from the surroundings in which the subjects live. Preferences were investigated across ethnicity and gender of the students.

Method

Subjects

A total of 160 children, 80 Anglo and 80 American Indians from grades two and three served as subjects. Eighty subjects were male and 80 were female; 81 were in the third grade and 79 in second grade. The Anglo participants came from a predominantly Anglo elementary school located in a Southwest metropolitan area. The American Indian participants came from two elementary schools located on Indian reservations near the same metropolitan area. The socioeconomic status of the students on the reservations is similar to many Southwest minority populations. The income level, unemployment rate, and school dropout rate are such that many of the students on the reservation are generally considered to be "at risk" of academic failure.

Materials

The materials consisted of 18 black and white 8 1/2" X 11" illustrations adapted from previous reading preference studies (Okada & Sullivan, 1971; Harper-Marinick, et al., 1990). The illustrations were organized into three categories: ethnicity of main character, gender of main character, and story-setting. Each category consisted of three pairs of illustrations.

Materials for ethnicity of main character included three pairs of illustrations representing the following combinations of children reading a book at a table: 1) two American Indians, 2) two Anglos, and 3) an Anglo and American Indian. This category was designed for use on a same-sex basis, that is, materials picturing only males were used with male subjects and materials showing only females were used with female subjects. Body positions and physical surroundings were consistent from picture to picture. Ethnicity was depicted by slight changes in physical features, such as skin tone, dress, and length and style of hair. The Indian characteristics in the illustrations were based on recommendations from American Indian artists.

The characters used in the ethnicity illustrations were also used for the gender of main character illustrations. They were arranged to include the following combinations of children reading a book: 1) two boys, 2) two girls, and 3) a boy and a girl. These materials were designed for use on a within-ethnicity basis. Materials picturing only Anglos were used with Anglo children and materials showing only American Indian children were used with American Indian children.

The story-setting materials included three illustrations depicting environmental settings commonly used in children's stories: 1) a school exterior, 2) a home exterior, and 3) a shopping area. These illustrations were drawn from photographs of actual settings. Two illustrations were prepared for each of the settings, one depicting a middle-class metropolitan setting and the other depicting a setting representative of an Indian reservation in the Southwest.

An example pair of illustrations for each of the three variables (ethnicity of main character, gender of main character, and story setting) is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Procedures

Each subject was interviewed individually by one of the two trained experimenters. The subjects were given the following directions:

> "I have a friend who writes stories for children just like you. My friend wants to write a story about these pictures but doesn't know which ones you would most like to read about. Look carefully at

these two pictures and tell me which one you would rather read about." The experimenters pointed to each illustration and described it orally in words that noted the relevant contrast in the pair (e.g., "Which would you rather read about, the two Indian children in this picture, or the two white children in this picture?"). Experimenters accepted either a verbal response or the child pointing to the illustration of his or her choice. Left-to-right positioning was systematically alternated for each pair of pictures to negate the possibility that position preferences would influence the results. Each experimenter ran approximately the same number of male and female subjects from both grade levels and across both ethnic groups.

Each subject was shown nine pairs of illustrations, three for ethnicity of characters, three for gender of characters, and three for setting. For example, for ethnicity the three illustrations portrayed two Anglo children together, two American Indian children together, and one Anglo and one Indian child together. For each pair, the child was asked to select the illustration s/he would prefer to read about. Similar procedures were employed for the three illustrations for gender (two boys, two girls, boy and girl), and the three for setting (three different suburban settings paired with three different reservation-like settings). The experimenters recorded responses on prepared forms.

Data Analysis

The proportion of times that each illustration type (e.g. same ethnicity, both ethnicities, opposite ethnicities) was chosen over the other two was recorded for ethnicity and for gender characters. Three separate chi-square analyses were employed to analyze each contrast (same vs. opposite, same vs. both, and both vs. opposite) by ethnicity and gender of the subjects.

The story setting responses were scored 1 for suburban settings and 0 for reservation-like settings. A score of 3 indicates that the subject chose all three of the suburban settings over the reservation-like settings. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used for story setting data to analyze differences among subjects by ethnicity and gender.

Data in all three categories were collapsed across grade levels because the scores of second-graders and third-graders were very similar on each of the three variables and no grade-level interactions were present.

Results

The results are reported below by ethnicity of main character, gender of main character, and story setting.

Ethnicity of Main Character

Table 1 shows the proportion of subjects who chose characters of the same ethnicity, both ethnicities, and the opposite ethnicity in the three pairs of

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Insert Table 1 about here

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illustrations. It can be seen that both American Indian and Anglo children consistently preferred illustrations with an American Indian and an Anglo over those with two children of their same ethnicity and over those with two children of the opposite ethnicity. American Indians chose both ethnicities over American Indians only in 70% of these pairings, and both over Anglos only in 53% of the pairings. Anglos chose both over Anglos only in 65% of the pairings and both over American Indians only in 66%. Overall, illustrations showing both ethnicities were selected 63% of the time when paired with the other two choices. The opposite ethnicity was selected in 44% of the pairings, and the same ethnicity was chosen in 43% of its pairings.

The same vs. opposite ethnicity comparison yielded very different preferences for American Indians and Anglos. American Indians chose the same ethnicity (American Indian) characters in 81% of their pairings with Anglo characters. In contrast, Anglos chose the same ethnicity (Anglo) characters in only 25% of their pairings with American Indian characters. This difference in preference on the same-opposite dimension was highly significant, χ^2 (1, 160) = 20.36, $p < .0001$. Boys' and girls' ethnicity preferences did not differ significantly from one another.

Gender of Main Character

Table 2 presents the proportion of subjects who chose characters of the same gender, characters of both genders, and characters of the opposite gender in three

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Insert Table 2 about here

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pairings of illustrations. Both American Indian and Anglo children indicated a strong preference for the same gender illustrations over those with the opposite gender. American Indians selected the same gender over the opposite in 97% of the pairings. Anglos chose the same gender over the opposite in 95% of these pairings. American Indian and Anglo subjects chose illustrations showing both genders over those showing either the opposite gender or the same gender. American Indians selected both genders over the opposite in 66% of the pairings and both over the same in 63% of the pairings. Anglos chose both over the opposite in 75% of the pairings and both over the same in 60%. Overall, illustrations depicting the subjects same gender were chosen 67% of the times when paired with the other two choices, both genders were selected in 66% of the pairings, and the opposite-gender in 17% of its pairings.

The comparison between both genders vs. the opposite gender yielded very different preferences for the boy and girl subjects. The boys selected both genders in 94% of the pairings with the opposite gender. In contrast, the girl subjects selected both genders in only 46% of the pairings with the opposite gender. There was a highly significant difference in this preference between both genders or the opposite gender, χ^2 (1, 160) = 42.976, $p < .0001$. Similarly, 64% of the boys selected the illustration depicting boys over the one with both genders, but only 14% of the girls selected girls over both genders, (χ^2 (1, N = 160) = 42.133, $p < .0001$). There were no significant differences between the gender preferences of the American Indian and Anglo subjects.

Story Setting

Table 3 shows the mean number of suburban illustrations chosen by ethnicity and gender. The table reveals that the 160 students selected an overall average of

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Insert Table 3 about here

2.46 suburban settings and only .54 reservation-like settings from three possible choices. Anglo children chose an average of 2.56 suburban settings and Indian children chose 2.35 suburban settings. Boys selected 2.49 suburban settings and females selected 2.43. Ninety-four percent (N = 150) of the subjects chose all three of the suburban settings (54%) or two of three suburban settings (40%). Only three subjects (2%) selected all three reservation-like illustrations.

A 2 (ethnicity) x 2 (gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the data in Table 3 revealed that the number of suburban settings chosen by Anglos (m = 2.56) was significantly higher that the number chosen by American Indians (m = 2.35), $F(1, 159) = 4.049$, $p < 0.05$. The difference between boys and girls was not statistically significant, nor was the ethnicity by gender interaction.

Discussion

Two characters were depicted in each of the illustrations for ethnicity and gender of main character. The reason for using two characters instead of one is that much of the research on children's preferences make the child select between one variable or the other. The weakness in this method is that it forces a choice between variables when in fact both can be incorporated into a story. This study was designed so the children can make the choice of reading about both ethnicities or both genders.

The findings from this study have positive implications for fostering the concept of ethnic diversity in children. American Indian and Anglo subjects consistently preferred to read about characters from both ethnic groups over those from their own group or from the opposite group. Interestingly, Anglo subjects also showed a strong preference for reading about the opposite ethnic group (American Indians) over their own ethnicity.

The results from three studies investigating friendship choices of primary grade children suggest that children prefer friends of their own ethnicity (Braha & Rutter, 1980; Davey & Mullin, 1982; Denscombe, 1983). However, this trend for same ethnicity friends did not transfer to the subjects preferences for which ethnicity they would most like to read about. The subjects in this study preferred to read about both ethnicities over their same ethnicity.

A very striking difference is present in the subject's responses to reading about characters of their same ethnicity over the opposite ethnicity. Eighty-one percent of the American Indian children preferred to read stories with American Indian main characters. Only 25% of the Anglo subjects chose to read stories with Anglo children. Perhaps the Indian children indicated a preference to read about their own ethnicity because they seldom get to read about themselves and would like to.

Anglo children, on the other hand, nearly always have the opportunity to read about their own ethnic group. Their preference for stories with American Indian children as the main characters would appear to reflect a desire for greater variety. They may feel that stories about Indian children have the potential to be more interesting than stories about children like themselves.

Ninety-six percent of both male subjects and female subjects preferred stories with main characters of their same gender rather than those with two characters of the opposite sex. This strong preference for same-gender over opposite gender characters is consistent with previous research on children's preference for gender of main character (Harper-Marinick, et al., 1990; Beyard-Tyler and Sullivan, 1972; Rose, Zimet & Blom, 1972).

Boys and girls differed significantly when choosing between reading about both a male and female or about two characters of the opposite sex. The majority (94%) of the boys preferred to read about both a boy and a girl instead of reading about two girls. In contrast, less than half (46%) of the female subjects indicated that they would prefer to read about both genders instead of two boys. This difference could possibly be attributed to boys not being interested in reading about girls by themselves. The girls, however, might think that reading a story with two boys would be more adventuresome than a story with both a boy and a girl.

Both the American Indian and Anglo subjects indicated a strong preference for stories with a suburban-type setting over those with a reservation-like setting. Although Anglo subjects had a significantly stronger preference for suburban settings than Indian subjects, this pattern was not a strong one when compared to the consistent preference for the suburban settings among both ethnic groups. Previous studies by Harper-Marinick, et al. (1990) and Okada and Sullivan (1971) have found that Black, Anglo, and Hispanic inner-city children have a strong preference for reading about suburban settings over the inner-city settings in which they live.

Suburban-type settings reflect not only a difference in location from the reservation-like settings, but also in economic level, because the setting and economic level go hand-in-hand. Therefore, children may make their selection on the basis of the appeal of a "nicer" setting rather than the location of the setting, per se, even though the oral directions to them on each item explicitly note the setting.

The results have several implications for authors of children's reading material. They support writing stories that encourage the concept of ethnic diversity by having main characters from different ethnic backgrounds, rather than having a very high proportion of Anglo main characters. This would include a selection of stories with American Indian children as leading characters. Lankford and Riley (1986) note that American Indian children need "culturally relevant" instructional material infused into their educational programs. The present results indicate that Anglo children may also benefit from the availability of reading material that includes American Indian characters.

The findings suggest authors should consider providing educational material that allows children to read stories with characters of their same gender, and also stories that have both a boy and a girl as main characters. These findings on children's preferences for ethnicity and gender of main character fit into the current trend of encouraging multiculturalism and non-sexists behavior in today's educational setting.

Research has shown that a student's intrinsic motivation and literal comprehension increases with the use of interesting reading material. This study has revealed that children are interested in stories with more than one ethnic background represented and both genders represented. It has also shown that children prefer to read stories with suburban-like settings. It would be useful to conduct further investigations to determine if children read more frequently, or show increases in learning when provided with reading material which reflects individual reading preferences. Further research which considers reading preferences for other individual content variables and various combinations of variables may also be useful. For instance, would an Anglo boy who wanted to read about two American Indian boys want to read about two American Indian girls? Would the American Indian children want to read about a suburban school with two Anglo boys? Continued research in children's preferences could prove beneficial to future reading improvement efforts.

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Table 1
Preferences for Ethnicity of Characters

[b]Ethnicity of Subjects	Pairing of Illustrations	[a]Preferred Ethnicity and Preference Level: Boy Subjects		Girls Subjects		Totals	
American Indian	Same vs. Opposite	Same	.85	Same	.77	Same	.81
	Same vs. Both	Both	.70	Both	.70	Both	.70
	Both vs. Opposite	Both	.55	Tie	.50	Both	.53
Anglo	Same vs. Opposite	Opp.	.68	Opp.	.83	Opp.	.75
	Same vs. Both	Both	.63	Both	.68	Both	.65
	Both vs. Opposite	Both	.70	Both	.63	Both	.66
Totals	Same vs. Opposite	Same	.59	Opp.	.53	Same	.53
	Same vs. Both	Both	.66	Both	.69	Both	.68
	Both vs. Opposite	Both	.63	Both	.56	Both	.59

[a]These columns show the preferred ethnic group for each pair of illustrations and the proportion of subjects choosing that group. For example, American Indian boys chose the illustration depicting their same ethnicity (American Indian) over the one depicting the opposite ethnicity (Anglo) 85% of the time, both ethnicities (Indian-Anglo) the same (Indian) 70% of the time, and the illustration depicting both (Indian-Anglo) over the opposite(Anglo) 55% of the time,

[b]n= 80 (40 boys and 40 girls) per ethnic group.

Table 2
Preferences for Gender of Characters

[b]Gender of Subjects	Pairing of Illustrations	[a]Preferred Gender and Preference Level: American Indian		Anglo		Totals	
Boy Subjects	Boys vs. Girls	Boys	.95	Boys	.98	Boys	.96
	Boys vs. Both	Boys	.62	Boys	.65	Boys	.64
	Both vs. Girls	Both	.92	Both	.95	Both	.94
Girl Subjects	Boys vs. Girls	Girls	1.00	Girls	.93	Girls	.96
	Boys vs. Both	Boys	.60	Both	.53	Boys	.54
	Both vs. Girls	Both	.88	Both	.85	Both	.86
Totals	Same vs. Opp.	Same	.97	Same	.95	Same	.96
	Both vs. Same	Both	.63	Both	.60	Both	.61
	Both vs. Opp.	Both	.66	Both	.74	Both	.70

[a]These columns show the preferred gender for each pair of illustrations and the proportion of subjects choosing that gender. For example, American Indian boys chose the illustration depicting their same gender (boys) over the one depicting the opposite gender (girls) 95% of the time, the illustration depicting boys over the one depicting both a boy and a girl 62% of the time, and the illustration depicting both (a boy and a girl) over the one showing the opposite (girl) 92% of the time,

[b]$\underline{n}$= 80 (40 boys and 40 girls) per ethnic group.

Table 3
Mean Suburban Settings Selected by Ethnic Group and Gender

Ethnic Groups[a]	Gender		
	Boys	Girls	Totals
Anglo	2.63	2.50	2.56
American Indian	2.35	2.35	2.35
Totals	2.49	2.43	2.46

Note. 3.00 = all three suburban settings chosen.
[a] n = 80 (40 boys and 40 girls) per ethnic group.

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Sample illustrations for the three variables: Ethnicity of main character, Gender of main character, and Story setting.

Ethnicity of Main Character (male subjects)

An American Indian and an Anglo

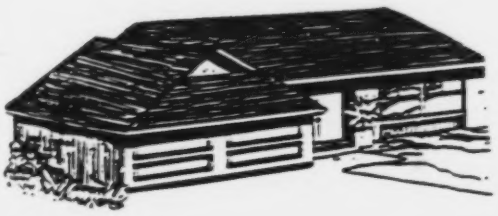
Two Anglos

Gender of Main Character (Anglo subjects)

Two girls

A boy and a girl

Settings



Suburban-like home

Reservation-like home